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MR. CHOATE AS AMBASSADOR

BY BRITANNICUS

[Not the least interesting feature of the delightful sketch which follows is the atmosphere which pervades it. Although now first published, it was written eleven years ago by a distinguished publicist who, despite a positive conviction to the contrary upon his own part, was then, and continues to be, somewhat more English than England herself. In reading it one cannot escape the impression which it conveys of the mighty empire at its greatest and solidest. Not only between the lines but through the phrasing itself breathes the unconscious but unmistakable sense, hardly of superiority, but at the least of sureness tinged quite agreeably and not unamusingly with a certain kindly condescension. As a recollection, if not as a revelation, Mr. Choate would have enjoyed it hugely no less for its charm than for the fine and hearty good fellowship manifested by his most excellent friend, who wrote then in a vein which now, alas, though perhaps for the ultimate best, has passed out of English possession.

Mr. Choate died happy, in harness, in the service of his country.
—EDITOR.]

For a man of sixty-five to transplant himself to a new social atmosphere and start out on a new career is an experiment not without its hazard even for the adaptability of an American. Yet it was this enterprise that Mr. Choate essayed when he accepted, in 1899, the post of American Ambassador to the Court of St. James, and not only essayed, but completely and brilliantly accomplished. It is an office that is not, and never has been, an easy one to fill. Of all diplomatic posts it is probably at once the pleasantest and the most exacting. It is the pleasantest because the American Ambassador in England is treated from the first rather as a national guest whom it is a delight to honor than as an official emissary. The mayor and corporation of Plymouth or Southampton habitually board his vessel

in the bay, and, even before he lands, convince him that the British people have no intention of surrendering him to the Court, Whitehall, and the West End. No other Ambassador that I have heard of, either to Great Britain or to any other nation, is similarly greeted. The compliment is unique. It is intended as a distinguishing recognition, on the part of the English people, that Great Britain and the United States stand to one another in a special relationship such as unites no other nations on this earth, and that between them some departure from the merely official attitude is of all things the most natural. As an Englishman I can sincerely say that it would be altogether against the grain of national instinct if no distinction were to be made between the American and other ambassadors. Popular opinion separates him at once from his colleagues of the diplomatic corps. He is the only one who reaches the mass of the people, in whom the people as a whole have any interest. From the day of his arrival he becomes an intimate part of English society, and a still more intimate part of the world of English art and letters and public—by which, of course, I do not mean political—life. Other ambassadors may be as lavishly entertained, may be able to show as full an engagement-list, may dispense, in return, an equally brilliant hospitality. But the quality of the welcome extended to them differs altogether from that which greets their American *confrère*. He alone gets behind the scenes, is shown the best of whatever England has to offer, and becomes at once a public character. Of him alone is it expected that he will be less of an official and more of a man. One hears, perhaps once in a lifetime, of the Russian or German Ambassador in London being asked to lecture before an educational or philosophical society or invited to a literary dinner. However great their command of English, they still stand outside all but a fraction of the national life. The public knows nothing about them, and does not care to know anything. They are what the American ambassador never is—they are foreigners and treated as such. A paragraph in the *Court Circular* is enough to announce their advent or recall, while their American colleague, on his arrival as well as his departure, receives a full-blown editorial salute from the entire London press. The one is merely an incident of officialdom; the other is a national event.

But all this while it makes the American Ambassadorship in London the most delightful post that any diplomat can hold, involves it also in some peculiar, delicate, and, I should think, rather irksome obligations. If we could conceive The Hague tribunal adjudicating so nice a point of international etiquette, I am afraid their decision would be that, in the case of the American Ambassador, we English commit the worst crime against hospitality by being too hospitable, that we ask too much of our guest and drive him too hard, and that there is something perilously adamant in the attentions we shower upon him. We never really give the poor man a moment's rest. Throughout his stay among us we presume inordinately on his acquaintance with English. There must, indeed, be times when we force him to wish he spoke Basque and Basque only, and did not the faith and morals hold that Milton held. So might he live among us and possess his soul in quietude—a diplomatist, and not a public institution.

But, as it is, no sooner has he reached London than the bombardment begins. I must admit at once that it is most vigorously replied to. England and the American Ambassador set to forthwith to see which can entertain the other the most. America insists on sending us her best, and we return the compliment by laying out the gift to the most ample advantage. We calmly take it for granted that the representative of the United States, whoever he may be, will be a first-class after-dinner speaker, familiar with the whole of American history and the whole of English literature, omniscient and omnipresent, and able and willing at any moment to read a paper, deliver an address, and unveil a monument. We turn him into a sort of lecturer to the nation. We launch him on a full tide of oratory from Land's End to John o' Groat's, thrusting upon him, as he sweeps along, the presidency of innumerable societies. We scout the idea that protocols and despatches and all the banalities of international negotiations can have any claim upon him. Knowing him to be an American, and therefore interested in education, we play upon his weakness and shamelessly take toll of his democratic sympathies. Things, indeed, have come to such a pass that an American Ambassador who was content to be merely an Ambassador, who could not or would not speak, who loathed public occasions and shunned a platform, and

who screened himself behind the ramparts of officialdom, would be reckoned not only a freak of nature, but a disappointment and a failure. It is partly, I am bound to say, America's own fault if a tongue-tied, unsociable, narrow-gauged, inflexibly official Ambassador from the United States has become unthinkable to us. She should not send us such charming, cultivated, good-natured men, every one of them triply armed with the capacity to discharge our exactions in full, every one of them with interests and affiliations stretching far beyond the humdrum official routine, every one of them with the instinct for warming both hands at the cheerful fire of English existence. Mr. Lowell used to complain that England spoiled the American Ambassador. I rather think that the American Ambassador is more apt to spoil England.

Such are the conditions which any one who aspires to be the official representative of the United States in Great Britain must be prepared to face. And, clearly, success in them demands a range of interests and a flexibility of disposition far beyond the ordinary. Most men of sixty-five or so, especially after a life spent in the service of one of the most exacting of professions, have grown too set and narrow for a post that asks, above all things, adaptability, breadth, and a sure social instinct. It took even Mr. Choate some little while to find his feet; but, once found, he marched with swift security to a position and a popularity unique in diplomatic annals. He came to us, of course, with a great name. Every English lawyer, every Englishman, indeed, who took any interest whatsoever in things American, knew of Choate as the head of the New York Bar, as the pre-eminent pleader of his generation, as a consummate after-dinner speaker, a wit, and a great citizen. He was sure of a welcome for his own sake as well as for the sake of the country he came from. But no one could have anticipated the extraordinary position he built up for himself in the social and public life of England.

He began well by leasing Lord Curzon's residence in Carlton House Terrace. You need, especially in London, where the address on one's note-paper carries an immense social significance, a sound judgment to choose just the right house in just the right locality. It was the first of Mr. Choate's successes that he came out of this ordeal in triumph. No part of London has a better standing than Carlton House

Terrace. Curzon Street is "smarter," Park Lane is more aggressively opulent, but Carlton House Terrace conveys to every Londoner an unequaled suggestion of ease, stateliness, and assured position. The German Government, with its quick eye, recognized this by purchasing one of the mansions in it for the German Embassy. Its position, indeed, is as delightful as any in London and far more convenient than most. It flanks on the Mall and St. James's Park; it is within a minute of Pall Mall and club land; within five minutes of all the Government offices and of most of the theaters and restaurants; and within a ten minutes' drive of Hyde Park, Belgravia, and Mayfair. At the same time it lies just off the main stream of traffic; it leads nowhere and forms, indeed, a *cul-de-sac* at both ends, being blocked at one end by the grounds of Marlborough House and at the other by the backs of the buildings on Cockspur Street. It thus forms one of those quiet, secluded streets that constantly surprise the visitor to London by their nearness to the center of things and their almost uncanny peacefulness.

Lord Curzon's house is what the house agents call "a noble and commodious mansion" in a block of noble and commodious mansions. Like all its neighbors, it was built some eighty years ago when Carlton House, once the residence of Frederick, Prince of Wales, was pulled down. English architecture at that time, *circa* 1830, was not particularly admirable. Artistically speaking, it was a dastardly age, and the exterior of Lord Curzon's house bears the blank, unprepossessing stamp of its period. But the interior more than makes up for it. It has all the virtues of the pre-Victorian style, the generous handling, the spaciousness, the simplicity, and few, if any, of its defects. So admirable are the proportions that the vastness of the rooms, the halls, the gallery, and the staircase goes almost unnoticed. All the details, too, are excellent; fine taste and a real sense of appositeness went to the selection of the furniture and there are few houses in London that have a better collection of Chippendale chairs, Oriental rugs, and Louis XIV. effects, while some, at any rate, of the Indian and Persian fabrics and kincobs on the walls of the reception-rooms are probably unique. Stamped with distinction and being equally removed from insignificance and from the vulgarity of mere display, it is,

in short, precisely the kind of residence in which one would always like to see the American Ambassador housed.

It was here that Mr. and Mrs. Choate quickly established one of the pleasantest and most frequented *salons* in London; and it was here, on six successive July the Fourths, they received on an average not less than two thousand of their countrymen and countrywomen. Both the Ambassador and his wife displayed on these occasions what was little less than genius for robbing a function of its formality. They managed to convey to each one of the two thousand a sense of personal welcome. To watch them shaking hands for three or four hours on end with hundreds upon hundreds of people whom they had never seen or heard of before the moment of presentation, you would have thought they were taking part in a patriotic pleasure instead of a patriotic duty—so precisely did their greeting hit the right mark. Trampled upon, overrun, their house turned upside down to allow the invading army room to circulate at will, their hands squeezed into a generous pulp, they never relaxed their smiling kindness. But it was at Mrs. Choate's Thursday At Homes, when the best of both nations met and mingled with a felicity nowhere else attained in London, that one realized most of all how admirably the great traditions of the American Embassy were being maintained.

The outstanding merit of Mr. Choate's Ambassadorship was its supreme range of sociability. Not that he did not attend zealously and punctiliously to the official duties of his post; there was rarely a day when he did not spend from two to four hours at the dingy offices in Victoria Street. Not that he had not his diplomatic successes; he helped to wipe out at least two most contentious issues that in other times and other hands might have led to something more than a passing disagreement. He reached London at a time when Anglo-American relations had just begun to pass into a new and friendlier phase. That phase, thanks in no small measure to his personality, became a fixed condition long before he returned to New York. England and America came appreciably closer together as the result of his six years' Ambassadorship, and his name will always be remembered as a potent and untiring instrument of Anglo-American good-will. But in these halcyon days of amity the American Ambassador who makes his mark is not the

official, the diplomat, the representative of the United States, but the national guest of England, the man; and he makes it by "going everywhere and meeting every one," by lending himself freely to the infinitely varied demands of English hospitality, by becoming, in short, Ambassador to the people as well as the Court. Mr. Choate got to know all classes and almost all corners in the British Isles. He spent himself ungrudgingly in forwarding many public and philanthropic movements, and in the task, which he ranked among the first of his official duties, of doing all he could to interpret America to England.

Hence his numerous appearances as a lecturer on American institutions and American statesmen, with crisp, popular, comprehensive discourses. There was no occasion of the slightest Anglo-American interest that could not enlist his presence and his voice; and the genial freshness, point, and aptness of his speeches made them always the event of the evening. He was never heard to repeat himself or to make a speech without saying something. He had the oratorical presence as well as the oratorical attributes—a fine, massive, lawyer-like head set imposingly on a stalwart frame; a voice of rare clarity and carrying power; gestures that were almost a species of eloquence in themselves; and an unhesitating flow of compact, orderly, colloquial phrases. He had read much and seen much and assimilated everything he either read or saw; and the richness of his nature, his unflagging zest in life, the little sting that lay in his wit and his mastery of the easy, fanciful, humorous turn made him, in public and in private alike, a prime favorite. It is almost painful to think of the demands that were made upon him. He never missed a single banquet on Independence Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Washington's Birthday during his six years of office. But that, while no slight penalty of his position, could scarcely stand a moment's comparison with all that was inflicted upon him by English insistence. He was the principal guest, and easily the principal speaker, at a dinner given by the Associated Chambers of Commerce within a fortnight of landing. In the six years that he spent in England he distributed the prizes at half a dozen schools, colleges, and institutions; he composed and delivered addresses on Franklin, on Lincoln, on the United States Supreme Court, on American Education, on Alexander Hamilton, and on Emerson; he proposed the

health of the Royal Society; he spoke on their favorite authors to the Sir Walter Scott Club, the Dante Society, and the Boz Club; he presided over a lecture by Mr. Birrell; he unveiled portraits and memorial windows and opened libraries; he spoke three or four times at the Guildhall banquet; he publicly interested himself in many philanthropies; and he was the speaker of the evening at dinners of remorseless frequency and racking variety. That, I am bound as an Englishman to confess, was asking a good deal of him. One would say it was really asking too much, were it not that we never seemed to touch the limit either of Mr. Choate's versatility or of his good nature. There were two characteristics of his speeches that one must always recall with gratitude. The first was that he never suggested the professional orator; he just stood up and gave us the easy outpourings of a well-stocked mind and a large and genial nature, never flat or stale, always quick with the play of humorous fancy. The second was that he never gushed. He never once committed the fatal mistake of soft-soaping England and English ways of doing things. On the contrary, he rarely rose to his feet without scoring a few good-humored points at our expense; and the English who like to be slapped on the face now and then by the right man—a Choate, a Chamberlain, or a Rhodes—loved him for it.

I well remember the farewell dinner to Mr. Choate at the Mansion House in May, 1905. It was an occasion difficult not to remember, not only because of the unsurpassable speech of the guest of the evening, but also because of the extraordinarily brilliant and diversified company that assembled to pay him a final tribute of affection and esteem. Something of all that was best in England had gathered to greet him. A list of those present would read like a list of the highest English notabilities in every walk of life—leading statesmen, great ecclesiastics, the heads of the law, scholars and professors, high municipal dignitaries, far-famed administrators, writers, artists, architects, doctors, surgeons, and scientists of the first rank, many of the captains of commerce and industry; in short, some three hundred and fifty of England's most distinguished sons. Public dinners are much the same all the world over; and in England, where they are cultivated as an art, uniformity is above all things their note. Yet there were characteristics

about the farewell banquet to Mr. Choate that stamped it with singularity. The singularity lay in the fact that all who were present were the personal friends either of Mr. Choate himself or of America. There was an atmosphere of downright, hearty, enjoying, and enjoyable fellowship that penetrated the entire company—the atmosphere, one might almost say, of a private dinner-party of congenial and sympathetic companions. Mr. Choate never spoke better. It was a great speech worthy of a great occasion. It moved from the start along a high plane of thought and sentiment. It showed to something like perfection that gift which seems to be one of nature's offerings to American orators—the gift of feeling the pulse of the audience and of striking at once just the right note. It had wit; it had humor; and it had also, what is the saving salt of all such efforts, sincerity and high feeling.

In moving tones he spoke of his difficulty in deciding whether he was glad or sorry to be returning home. "My friends on this side of the water are multiplying every day in numbers and increasing in the warmth of their affections. I am sorry to say that the great host of my friends on the other side are as rapidly diminishing and passing away. 'Part of the host have crossed the flood and part are crossing now,' and I have a great yearning to be with the waning number." He passed in light and apt review the English traits that had most impressed him—"the reign of law absolutely sovereign and supreme in all parts of the land; individual liberty carried to its highest perfection, perfected by law and subject to it; that splendid and burning patriotism which inspires your young men when their country calls to risk life and all they hold dear for her sake." Besides that he declared he would carry away with him the most delightful personal memories—"memories of exalting and enduring friendships formed, of many happy homes visited, of boundless hospitality enjoyed." He spoke with great earnestness on the relations between England and America, and on the duty of public opinion and the press in both countries to keep cool when difficulties or disputes arose. "I have endeavored," he said, "to make the English people better acquainted with my own country, its history, its institutions, its great names, for the purpose of showing them that really the difference between an Englishman and an American is only skin-deep, that under different

historical forms we pursue with equal success the same great objects of liberty, of justice, and of the public welfare, and that our interests are so inextricably interwoven that we would not, if we could, and could not if we would, escape the necessity of an abiding and perpetual friendship." That is a great mission, and Mr. Choate, who was a great man, greatly fulfilled it. "He came," said a London journal on the morrow of the farewell banquet, "as a friend among friends; he goes leaving friends still friendlier." Mr. Choate could have wished for no finer epitaph than that.

BRITANNICUS.